

ALEX GAWRONSKI

Art is
Not Magic



...for the disenchanting world the fact of art is an outrage, an after image of enchantment, which it does not tolerate. If, however, art unflinchingly acquiesces in this and posits itself blindly as sorcery, it degrades itself to an act of illusion in opposition to its own claim to truth and undermines itself with a vengeance.
Theodore Adorno¹

Art's relationship to magic is historically embedded and has taken many forms. Today, there are increasing numbers of exhibitions that seek to emphasise contemporary art's connection to magic, myth or ritual. Given that the contemporary term of 'magic' denotes an extremely generalised series of trans-cultural narratives, images, pseudo-beliefs and superstitions, it is worth considering what art's renewed interest in it might mean. The more life is conditioned by precarity linked to materialism, the more art seeks to escape this reality by regressing into fantasies of mystical non-alignment. 'Magic' is a useful cliché already associated with the history of art that allows it to pretend exemption from present ugly truths, whether political or economic. What better way to exit the pressures of the present, felt acutely by many artists, than imaginatively via recourse to the pseudo-discourse of magic? The more complex and compromised the present, the more enslaved by corporatism and the 'magical' effects of virtualised finance, the more tempting it is to withdraw to an art world conceived as a magical kingdom. Interestingly, as magic is a stereotype long associated with creativity, its referencing in contemporary art paradoxically supports its financialisation. Art which seeks to reveal magical truths and that endows the artist with unearthly visionary abilities, effectively transforms it into a post-religious talisman. Art becomes a magical thing, thus escaping its identity as a mere commodity among commodities. Yet it is 'spiritual' in the safety of an almost entirely secularised global art world. It is a magical 'thing' in the absence of a genuine belief in transcendence. As much as contemporary art is founded firmly upon principles of extreme individualism, it is devoid of the collectivism necessary for a coherent theory of transcendence. Nevertheless, art becomes something to believe in again in a world of extreme relativism where the only guarantee of value is located in the literalism of material success.

As a result of globalised economic circumstances the effects of this literalisation of value 'as if by magic', has reached every corner of the world. Trends and cultural discourses that were once limited to the West have spread globally. Nonetheless, the magical identity granted by art world aficionados to select contemporary artists in the USA and Europe, and assumed by some of the artists themselves, has yet to travel to regions like the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East. While economic globalisation functions as a form of neo-colonisation, its cultural effects are not always so successfully implanted. As Western culture faces endemic identity crises over ways to renew its once unquestioned prestige and dominance other nations with expanding markets, in the Middle East and Southeast Asia for example, forge alternative identities. These are often quite resistant to the worn artistic tropes currently being replayed in the West, one being the return of the artist as magician. Due to its extent, the economic boom being experienced by certain countries within these regions could be perceived as quasi-magical. The effects of such rapid growth are both positive and negative however. They are negative as far as they polarise populations as economic winners and losers, as elsewhere. They are more positive in their exemplification of the contemporary possibility of regionalised cultural resistance to hegemonic Western example. China is a paradigmatic example in this regard. Undoubtedly influenced by Western art trends concurrent with the contemporary intensified rate of economic exchange, many practicing Chinese artists have devised ways to diffuse blind acceptance of Western iconography. They have achieved this by deliberately mimicking and internalising Western imagery while filtering it through pointed references to Chinese contemporary experience. The process is clearly dialectical rather than

magical. Still, such practices exist alongside others that are overtly opportunistic and entrepreneurial, where the Chinese artist is willing to play at being authentic for the benefit of Western collectors. The ‘magic’ these artists create, often on extreme budgets and at extreme scales, suggests perhaps that the fetishised individuality traditionally coveted by Western artists, allowing them to be considered and to consider themselves special, is not so far off. It is important to note this now because the example of the artist as magician, as über-individual, has a long history in the West and it has recently reappeared.

In the past, art was not fettered by its identity as an elite commodity, nor constrained by the archival dictates of the museum. It was outside the institution but inside society. Cave painters, mystics, shamans and so-called ‘primitives’ could see and experience things ‘out of this world’ that modern Westerners, an inherently corrupted breed, could not. Of course, for cave painters and ancient humankind there was no such thing as art. Art’s separateness from the world was marked by representation’s capacity to set aside and contain the seen. Traditionally, an icon doesn’t aim to represent sacred stories or persons; its function is immanent. The icon *is* sacred. A shamanistic talisman likewise is not a work of art but a powerful socio-mythical tool, as are totems. These objects and images of belief have only since become works of art. Once transformed into art though, even of a museological and ethnographic kind, such manifestations were often still believed by many laypersons to harbour special properties. Such properties had just shifted from those associated with a specific culture and its socio-geographic origins to the more rudimentary purview of art in general. When Picasso borrowed primitive imagery from African tribal art he was clearly hoping that the directness of these ritually endowed objects would reinvigorate the canon of Western painting; more so conferring upon the modern artist a magician-like potency.² That is not to say that Picasso, as a key modernist, openly proclaimed himself an artist-magician. Yet it is true that he presented an image of himself as a type of conjurer who could turn absolutely anything at all into art merely by the sleight of his hand.³ He and other modern artists deploying primitivising tendencies conveyed a sense of raw primal urgency that was even used retrospectively on high art history.⁴

Picasso’s proclivities were symptomatic of a much broader trend in Western intellectual history. Seminal studies by Sigmund Freud (*Totem and Taboo*, 1913), Marcel Mauss (*The Gift*, 1925) and Bronislaw Malinowski (*The Sexual Lives of Savages*, 1929) had all, in their different ways, brought the tribal and social customs of non-European cultures to the critical attention of the West, ritual and magic being central to these cultures. Actor, novelist, playwright and theorist of the Theatre of Cruelty,⁵ Antonin Artaud ventured in 1936 to Mexico to seek out and participate in, the peyote rituals of the Tarahumaran shamans.⁶ Georges Bataille, anti-clerical, anti-idealist philosopher of cruelty, eroticism and excess and contemporary of the Surrealists, had formed at the same time his own secret society, *Acéphale* (and publication).⁷ *Acéphale*’s emblem of a headless man standing arms outstretched, holding in one hand a dagger and in the other an eviscerated heart, was designed by Surrealist André Masson. Its members unanimously adopted several rituals⁸ and also seriously discussed “the possibility of carrying out... human sacrifice”.⁹ In 1936, speaking in relation to *Acéphale*, Bataille wrote, “I can become religious and especially I can be religious, keeping myself above all from defining what I follow or how.”¹⁰ *Acéphale* was “religious, ‘fiercely’ so... and paradoxically so as well.” It was decidedly not religious “in any Christian sense”, but “rather in the spirit of the Aztec gods, those ‘fierce and malevolent gods’, that impressed (Bataille) so forcefully”.¹¹

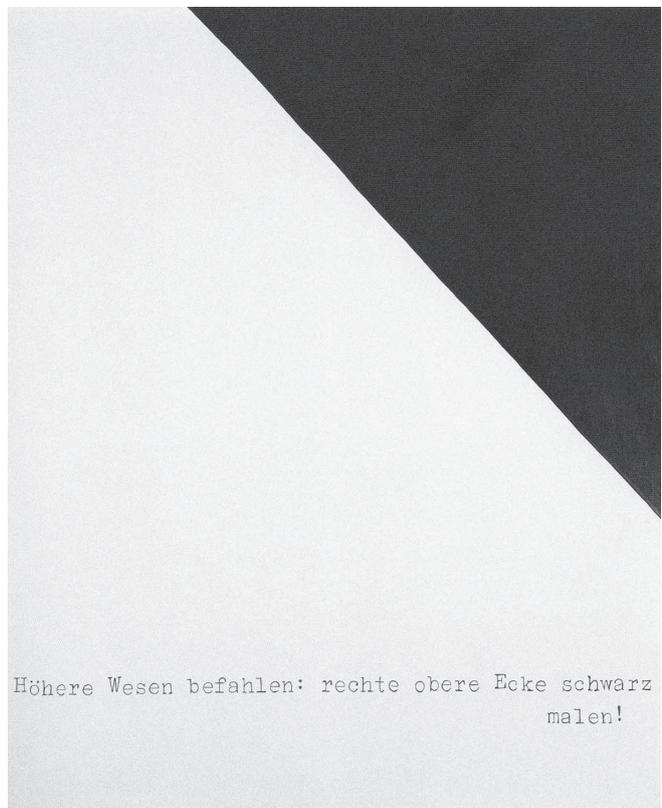
Surrealism's leader André Breton, Bataille's sworn ideological enemy,¹² also famously propelled Surrealism in the direction of magic via its deliberate occultation. Earlier, Breton had advocated Surrealism's pursuit of "*les merveilleux*". The marvellous for Breton and his followers represented a magical realm that everything contemporary bourgeois French society was not—spontaneous, playfully irrational, rebellious, anti-utilitarian, and anti-capitalist. Breton's theory of the marvellous emphasised desire as the true driver of human interaction and experience. Surrealism, at least at first, aimed to socially liberate subjective desire and thus, in principle, rescue individuals and societies from existences burdened by tradition and unthinking obligation. Desire was against protectionist state interests, material acquisitiveness and familial convention. It was for singular expressions like "*l'amour fou*" (crazy love) and "convulsive beauty".¹³ The Surrealists pursuit of societal self-liberation fared less well though when faced with the harsh political circumstances leading to the advent World War II. During this period Breton and his supporters turned, paradoxically according to many, to a committed support of Communism.¹⁴ However, unable and unwilling to tow the Communist's increasingly hard line and excessively restrictive cultural outlook, a core of Surrealists fled to the USA to escape the physical and material consequences of Vichy France.¹⁵

Breton and those close to him eventually returned to Europe where they met a mixed reception. Facing friends and colleagues who had stayed behind in France for the War's duration (who suffered its hardships and who fought with clandestine organisations and managed to survive), the returned Surrealists could no longer attempt to claim an ideological higher ground. From this compromised position, the re-politicisation of Surrealism was no longer an option. Such a move under the circumstances would have seemed opportunistic and worse, barely believable.¹⁶ This was the precise point at which Breton and his followers "sought to discover new myths rather than perpetuate what they perceived as outmoded ideologies"¹⁷ choosing instead the wholehearted embrace of esotericism and the occult, finding "solace in primitive legend, and in alchemy."¹⁸ It was essentially a rear-guard move extolling subjective interiority, a space of self-banishment and inner exile. Of course, narratives of magic, myth and the fabulous were far more palatable generally, and especially to the Surrealists' new contacts in the USA than the politics of world Communism. In fact, soon many Surrealists were selling out to the fashion industry and popular culture, their works avidly acquired by Europe's aristocracy as much as by the New World nouveau riche.¹⁹ What was once avant-garde became by way of the pursuit of the magically irrational perfect fodder for those seeking reinvigorated signs of a new "creativity, the most powerful of modern myths"²⁰ regardless of the fact that, "creativity (had) nothing subversive left; that myth (had) dated."²¹

Surrealism's example is significant. Its story depicts the vicissitudes of an avant-garde collective originally bearing an ambitious socio-political program reduced to subjective withdrawal in the face of a world, and art world, that would only absorb what was most superficial about it, what was most 'artful' in it. The journal *Revolution Surrealiste*²² steered somewhat desperately through the politics of the orthodox Communist Left, retreated to arcane investment in magic and poetic fancy and ended most prominently as one of modern art's most bankable genres.²³

During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s numerous American postmodern critics questioned intensely this type of paradox endemic to modernity—utopian idealism versus socio-political impact. What was glaringly obvious to postmodern analysis was Surrealism's confused and disconcerting vacillation, its inability to manifest any kind of genuinely effective politico-artistic platform. While supporters like Hal Foster positively dissected its psychoanalytic leanings,²⁴ Surrealism's convenient trawling of non-Western cultures, like many other modernist movements, was critically analysed by

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other writers like Roslyn Krauss.²⁵ After all, what was most ‘magical’ about modern art if not its ability to turn a blind eye to the industrialised West’s self-appointed superiority over every other culture? And this was despite the fact that the modern West perpetually renewed itself via non-Western example. Modern art that highlighted the ‘magic’ of creativity, art’s inherent ‘miraculousness’, represented in actuality a vanishing act that concealed art’s generative truth by mystifying both art and artist for the benefit of a new generation of wealthy collectors. Ironically, the Surrealist artists who relocated mainly to New York during World War II, and who essentially brought the concept of modern art to the USA, ended up a generation later targets of the largely Anglo-American project of postmodernity.²⁶ The West’s glossing over of its self-privileging made many of the claims of modern movements like Surrealism difficult to sustain. This was especially true in a world where evidence of modernist utopias was increasingly difficult to identify. Jackson Pollock, the USA’s ‘first’ modern painter, at least according to the particular myth that grew around him, was initially, entirely enamoured of the Surrealist avowal of myth and ritualistic imagery, as was his contemporary Mark Rothko. Later, the very *act* of art making was ritualised by these New York painters. The act of art was its own magic. Watching these developments from afar, the elderly, allegedly ever-responsive chameleon-like Picasso succeeded only in further perpetuating his own myth as the magical transformer of forms. He was a shape shifter; literally. As modernism’s favourite magician, Picasso’s furtive and obsessive formal experiments never led him once to question either the contextual ramifications of his sources or the assumed exceptionality of his own celebrity.²⁷

The dubiety of the meaning of magic in modern art, and the modern artist’s supposedly innate visionary exceptionality, has targeted other artists much more pointedly. Most cited in this regard was post-World War II German practitioner Joseph Beuys. In fact, Beuys was especially singled out for negative attention by the American editorship of the seminal contemporary art journal *October*.²⁸ Beuys’ career, as is almost universally known, grew from a foundational myth of almost biblical proportions. In that myth, whose concrete truth is practically impossible to verify, the young artist, then with the Luftwaffe, crash-landed in Siberia where he was rescued by local Tartars who nursed him back to health by utilising the healing properties of fat and felt. These elements subsequently became central to Beuys’ personal artistic mythology. The Tartars, an ancient nomadic tribe (and guerrilla force of exceptional equestrian prowess during the Middle Ages), were equally well known for their shamanistic rituals. The implicit claim underlying Beuys’ foundational story is that he, an exceptional figure reborn an artist, had absorbed the otherworldly spiritual powers of the Tartar shamans as if by symbiosis. Thus Beuys’ anti-rationalist, messianic identity was born. In the 1970s he stated, “In places like universities, where everyone talks too rationally, it is necessary for a kind of enchanter to appear.”²⁹

Nonetheless, Beuys simultaneously engaged in progressive political causes, helping to found the German Greens Party and deploying his Office for Direct Democracy in an attempt to establish the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research from his professorial seat at Düsseldorf’s Art Academy. His anti-institutional activities from within this fêted institution resulted in his dismissal, provoking an international petition signed by many eminent international artists who collectively supported his unorthodox pedagogical actions, calling for his instant reinstatement. Beuys was not so generous though when Hans Haacke’s 1971 exhibition at New York’s Guggenheim Museum was cancelled and its curator sacked.³⁰ Generating a massive outcry from well-known artists all over the world, Beuys, as one of the era’s most iconically famous practitioners, and despite his messianic self-fashioning, curiously refused to lend his name to any support. Responding to this incident one notable

signatory, conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers, composed a fictionalised response to one of Beuys' own essays.³¹ Broodthaers' skeptical letter questioned Beuys' particular mixing of art and magic: "Your essay 'Art and Revolution' discusses magic... politics... the politics of magic? Of beauty? Or of ugliness? ... Messiah... I can hardly go along with that contention of yours, and at my rate I wish to register my disagreement if you allow a definition of art to include one of... magic."³²

Beuys' invocation of magic and shamanism appears at a particular historical juncture. As an ex-combatant of the German war machine, it is unsurprising that he played down his national heritage as the sheer extent of National Socialist brutality became globally known. Not being tied to a concrete context or the realities of a by-now tainted heritage also meant that the figure of the artist could be made to appear universal.³³ It was from this position of universalism, very different from the internationalist ideal of Communism³⁴ that the artist-shaman could speak for everyone. "Everyone is an artist"³⁵ except they needed to be told this by the supreme artist-seer, Joseph Beuys. Despite the considerable formal and spatial achievements of his art and his particularly innovative sensitivity to materials, the artist's portrayal of the artist-as-redeemer ultimately returned focus to the exceptionality of Beuys himself. Beuys' institutional and market success in North America³⁶ could also be partially traced to this iconic presentation of the ancient-modern artistic Self, ripe with generalised mythic suggestion. Through the figure of Beuys, we witness a strategic shifting of historical truth onto a conveniently universal horizon where anything was possible for the artist, even magic. The fact that Beuys' spiritual quest ended, ironically, in the resolutely archival context of the museum and the abidingly commercial context of the auction house did not go unmentioned.³⁷

The severe treatment meted out to Beuys by many high profile critics during the 1980s did nothing to stop subsequent artists dallying with mystifying narratives hinting at magic and ritual. Indeed, one of the USA's own most internationally successful artists of recent years, Matthew Barney could also be regarded as something akin to the creative progeny of Beuys, or, more accurately, of Beuys and Andy Warhol. Barney's media savvy equals and extends that of both earlier artists. His arcane use of alchemical materials and referencing of contemporary popular culture, also speak to important aspects of the practices of each. Much of Barney's art abounds with oblique references to cultish secret societies like the Freemasons just as Beuys' art cited Theosophy and Steinerism.³⁸ Materially as well, Barney effectively replaced Beuys' obsession with fat and felt, and an aged dirty palette, with more modern, libidinally invested substances like soap and frozen Vaseline that are inherently clean and 'shiny'. Nonetheless, as in Beuys' oeuvre, the alchemical and transformative quality of Barney's chosen materials are consistently foregrounded. These materials are never simply what they appear. Additionally, the heavy emphasis on ritualised performativity central to Barney's work is equivalent to that of Beuys. Similarly, Barney's performances and videos, especially his most famous work the *Cremaster* series,³⁹ routinely place the figure of the artist at the centre of his creation. Like a mystical version of Leonardo da Vinci's ideal 'Vitruvian Man' in Barney's art "it was he himself who was the *divinity* of his world".⁴⁰ Barney repeatedly portrays himself as a changeling capable of transforming himself into any manner of mystically enabled creature, familiar or otherwise. One minute he's a satyr, the next Neptune, then a bloody-mouthed 'alien' highlander. Overall Barney conjures worlds marked by obscure repetitious interactions set in motion at the artist's command.⁴¹

Barney's work emerges from the tail end of American postmodernity and seeks a way out of the confines of a critical culture placing all emphasis on rational deconstructive analysis. As an antidote for some, "Barney (had) created the image of the contemporary, writing his own sacred text on today's society."⁴² Therefore, and unlike many postmodern artists, Barney resolutely avoided direct quotation, although he regularly references other artists and earlier artistic periods. Alternatively, he highlights densely irrational narratives emerging seemingly out of psychoanalytical sources. Barney's works however are by no means strictly psychoanalytical either for they weld a mystic impulse onto the classic repertoire of psychoanalytical imagery.⁴³ Via this conjunctive manoeuvre Barney's work is effectively exempted from its reading as simple neurotic confession or as practiced academic Symbolism. Collectively, Barney's art constructs an affective mythology whose centre is Matthew Barney. As with Beuys, Barney's home territory is private myth. The baroque convolutions and de-centredness of Barney's mythical terrain renders it ultimately inaccessible from either analytical or straight narrative perspectives. The problem for viewers that such inaccessibility might have posed is alleviated though by his artful, entertainment-savvy, piling-up of spectacular imagery that is alternately disturbing and titillating. The solipsistic density of mystifying imagery and the obscurity of Barney's ritualised self-mythology, curiously only achieve a worldliness and comprehensibility via material association with the real world of contemporary corporate capitalism.⁴⁴

Just as Beuys' artistic ascendance occurred at a particular historical moment immediately following World War II marking the limit of modernity, so too Barney's rise to prominence occurred at a significant juncture effectively signalling the waning of postmodernity. The era to come, our era, could be described as post-postmodern.⁴⁵ Barney took reactive, anti-rationalist and mythologising narratives, tendencies held in check by dominant postmodern critical discourses, and sexualised and glamourised them. Cognisant of the diminishing seriousness of psychoanalysis as a science he transformed visual signifiers of it into an uncanny mythic spectacle fit for the rich of contemporary America, a wealthy playground where perversion was no longer pathological but mysterious as well as entertaining. Earlier, 1980s feminists in particular, had targeted a burgeoning money culture and the concurrent exacerbated centrality of hyper-individualist artist-heroes. Their critiques extolled the ideal of a communal spirituality and the invention of new rituals to break the stranglehold of neoliberal instrumentality.⁴⁶ With the art of Barney and others of his ilk, the socio-critical promise of ritual and magic was basically diverted into high-definition digital spectacle, the depiction of which, intricate and complexly imagined, was realised on considerable budgets practically rivalling those of mainstream popular culture.

Barney remade the earnest critiques of the previous generation seeking socio-cultural alternatives, mystifyingly sexy. The Leftist 'magicalised' eco-feminism promoted by art historians like Suzi Gablik, opens with Barney's generation to the world of art-magic as obscurantist razzle-dazzle. The institutionalised norm emphasising the artist's creative exceptionality and marketable eccentricity is restored via such work to the museum context, a context un-coincidentally financially threatened. The contemporary evocation of the artist as magician potentially rescues the art institution symbolically from awareness of the bleakness of its contemporary fight for relevance within a popular culture persistently clamouring for the same limited resources. Through the elevation of mythic function that an artist like Barney was so adept at harnessing, the museum becomes again, at least at face value, a unique place of ritual—the type of ritual the art museum offers is *only* available, it implicitly argues, within art and its institutions. Increasingly de-emphasised is the labour of critique, or the difficulty of semiotic translation, that might ask audiences to confront uncomfortable truths, including those questioning the supposed sanctity of that art.

In 2017, when asked what makes good art the director of the *Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art*, Joseph Beckstein replied, “magic”.⁴⁷ This idiosyncratic comment coming from a veteran Russian Conceptualist indicates more broadly a global situation where art’s attempts to address a sense of its lost universalism “either by reclaiming this long-lost elitist status or by naively continuing to insist on art’s impact on social and political affairs, just wasn’t interesting anymore”.⁴⁸ While not explicitly magic-themed the *Moscow Biennale’s* underlying spiritualist orientation expressed as it was in our “post-ironic” age,⁴⁹ a much wider “return to art as a soul-searching type of activity, a return to the art of soul searching”.⁵⁰ This type of attitude resuscitating a previously rejected characterisation of art as supernatural and magically facilitated, has appeared numerous in many other recent exhibitions. In 2006 the exhibition *Strange Powers* was presented in New York by Creative Time, professing that “artists themselves exude a magical force, and that their powers are worth considering”.⁵¹ In 2007, Helga-Marie Nordny and Sylvia Kochanska curated *Future Primitives* at UKS, Oslo, its artists “incorporating the magical directly into their broader practice”.⁵² *Traces du Sacré (Traces of the Sacred)* staged at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2008⁵³ aimed to reveal “the ways in which art continues to demonstrate, often in unexpected forms, a vision that goes beyond the ordinariness of things and how, in a completely secular world, it remains the secular outlet for an irrepressible need for spirituality.”⁵⁴ This multifaceted exhibition, entirely earnest in approach, traced genealogies of the spiritual in art by way of a series of important art-historical signposts. Wassily Kandinsky, who authored the epochal essay, ‘Concerning the Spiritual in Art’ in 1911, was unsurprisingly a pivotal reference for the exhibition. Elsewhere, the 2016 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* presented *Magic Object*, its press release posing the open question, “are artists the last magicians?”⁵⁵ The *Biennial*, it asserted, drew “inspiration from the ‘Wunderkammer’, those rooms or cabinets of wonder dedicated to the display of magical objects”.⁵⁶ It championed “the contemporary artist as conjurer”⁵⁷ whose interests were “in the talismanic, in cultural rituals and material riddles”.⁵⁸ In 2017, continuing this trend, STUK-House for Dance, Image and Sound in Leuven, Belgium hosted the multi-part hybrid exhibition *The Act of Magic*, exploring according to its curators, “how we can understand magic and the magical in contemporary society”.⁵⁹ Magic, “this inherently ambiguous concept evokes notions such as illusion, enchantment and awe, but is equally related to a deeper understanding of magical powers, the occult or supernatural, rituals and animism. It calls forth a range of interpretations on a continuum from pure illusion to a deep belief in a parallel world full of magical powers.”⁶⁰

In relation to this event, anthropologist Graham M. Jones wrote, “The concept of magic is fundamentally ambiguous—no one is sure what they are talking about when they are talking about magic; its definition is always changing.”⁶¹ Engagement with magic as a phenomenon as much as a curatorial brief asks the participant or viewer to give up their critical faculties in order to be awed, the reward for suspending our belief, especially within the institutionally encoded confines of the art museum, is anyone’s guess. (As is withholding criticism of artists ‘going native’, ironically or not, for the sake of contemporary audiences’ entertainment.⁶²)

Not all artists who have referenced magic, myth, ritual or spirituality have done so in the earnest self-searching or outright spectacularised way endemic to the majority of contemporary exhibitions on the subject. For example, when Sigmar Polke, the supposedly “daring visionary lord of the alchemical phantasmagoria of painting”⁶³ produced the work *Hobere Wesen befehlen: rechte obere Ecke schwarz malen!* (*The Higher Powers Command: Paint the Upper Right Hand Corner Black!*) (1969), it was obviously in a spirit of irony. This is evident in the painting’s inclusion of its own title near the bottom in bureaucratic typewriter font. Likewise, Los Angeles artist Mike Kelley’s mordant ritual-inflected

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performance/installations like *Monkey Island* (1982) and *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile* (1985), suggest a sub-cultural version of magic satirically conjuring a certain pathological adolescent stupidity. Such works symbolically portray the vain defense of a powerlessly subjected ego ascribing id-like properties to inanimate objects. Thus, various prosaic things are overlain with magical suggestion. Their real 'magic' however pertains merely to the extent of their hyperbolic refashioning. Magic is resolutely impotent in these works. This is also the case in numerous works by Kelley's contemporary Jim Shaw. These variously blend references to dreams, the occult, ritualised sacrifice, Surrealism, cartoons and post-psychedelic pop art. The result is a deliberately confused amalgam of distorted visual cues as if magic were ultimately derived, like a Chinese whisper, from the half-understood pseudo-literate admixing of incompatible sources. Even land artist Robert Smithson, whose famous *Spiral Jetty* (1970) risked being read as a quintessentially universalist spiritual motif, expressed his underlying distaste for the notion of art as magic, writing, "I am just not interested in the occult. Those kinds of systems are just dream worlds and they are fiction at their best and at worst, they are uninteresting."⁶⁴

During his career, Jimmie Durham, a long time activist of the American Indian Movement, has produced innumerable objects reminiscent of sacred totems and other ritualistic artifacts. Despite their superficially magical appearance, these sculptures are in fact laced with an irony based on a subtle preemptive accusation of the habits of art viewers, particularly white Europeans. This includes the automatic tendency to project qualities of spirituality onto any object bearing any resemblance to traditional tribal art. More obvious in this regard are Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Works from the Chapman Family Collection* (2002). Critiquing colonialism in the most self-consciously oafish way, this series consisted of pastiches of African totemic carvings into which they incorporated McDonald's fast-food iconography. Somewhat reminiscent of Polke's magically facilitated black painted corner, New Zealand artist Dane Mitchell's installation *Conjuring Form* (2008) consisted of a purpose-built barrier enclosing empty museum space and a sign affixed reading, "A spirit has been summoned to this space. Please do not enter." Implied here is that the spirit in question is aligned with the modernist notion of the inherent spirituality of the art museum as a kind of mediumistic domain, a surrogate temple or church. In both instances, it is emptiness itself which is called upon to signify as if from beyond. In 2001 Mexican artist Miguel Angel Rios produced the video work *Los niños brotan de noche* (*The Children That Spring Out at Night*). In it the artist imbibes hallucinogens administered by indigenous Mexican shamans who then talk him through the experience. What this video reveals however is not an earnest documentary of the artist's naïve attempt to inhabit the world of the shaman, even if that impulse might have informed something of the work's original impulse, but an illustration of the pretension and cultural incompatibility of an outsider attempting to become an insider. The 'trip' the artist undertakes is not a perfectly pure pre-lingual experience, but a culturally inscribed moment whose exact tenor is informed by the participant's pre-extant litany of cultural referents. The outsider attempting to penetrate the ancient magical truth of an indigenous culture finds himself instead inside a traumatically meaningless experience.

Finally, another exhibition, *The Great Transformation: Art and Tactical Magic* appeared at the Frankfurter Kunstverein and the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Vigo in Spain in 2008. Unlike *Traces du sacré*, this exhibition emphasised the metaphorical dimension of magic and its relationship to art. It deployed magic in a manner suggested by Adorno's opening quote; magic or sorcery as a metaphor "first and foremost, for the experimental methodology of art production that can in fact be turned *against* the reactionary forces of ritual and superstition, of obscurantism and occultism."⁶⁵



The return to narratives of magic in art in recent years reveals much about attitudes informing the current cultural climate, unconsciously gesturing towards a historical horizon where modernity borrowed magical and ritualistic signifiers from the art of colonised people with the hope of reinvigorating Western art. It indicates as well how such borrowings were successful, primarily in inflating the myth of creativity to a type of magical act at the centre of which was the individual artist as Great Creator. It further suggests the temporary crisis of this image of the artist, once postmodern semiotic analysis and a growing awareness of cultural difference had shown it to be deeply compromised. The burgeoning revival of magical discourse in art happens at a time when evidence of previous attempts, particularly by feminists, to reinvest it with contemporary critical power, seems to have glaringly failed. It occurs at a time too when many art museums are threatened with serious funding cuts. Therefore, directors and curators seek ever more ways to redraw incontrovertible evidence of art's singularity. This in itself is a significant challenge in a thoroughly globalised climate where art is increasingly viewed as largely no different from other contemporary cultural expressions. For every humble artwork like Marina Abramovich's energising crystal slippers or New Zealand sculptor, Francis Upritchard's fanciful goblin-creatures, there will be a meteorically successful populist blockbuster focused on magic like *Harry Potter* or *Game of Thrones* produced with extraordinary production budgets. Ritualising the space of the museum, while perpetuating the myth of the artist's visionary singularity, attempts to restore to institutions their once innocent, quasi-religious aura. Today this auratic leftover strategically avoids direct reference to historical precedents, their failures or paradoxes. And unlike previous attempts to reinvent myth, ritual and magic as part of an effort to re-consecrate culture in the face of its endemic financialisation, it is entirely devoid of critical purpose. More broadly, magic's return is symptomatic of our supposedly "post-critical" moment, "welcomed as a release from constraints that are variously seen as conceptual, historical and political."⁶⁶ Glamourised and spectacularised, magical imagery and ritualised gesture only restore the most reactionary myths of the artist's divine creativity to the centre

of contemporary art. This is useful to some curators and institutions because belief, of all kinds, is inherently resistant to critical or analytical contestation; *it is what is*. It is a disingenuous move that prefigures art as the neutered spectacle of inane fancy albeit with mystical overtones.

'Magic' in contemporary art is almost invariably of the white (as opposed to black) variety as befits the inclinations of the 'Like' generation.⁶⁷ It emerges against the backdrop of the seemingly inescapable corporatisation and managerial enforcement of positive consensus within an increasingly precarious work environment. By no means supernatural, contemporary artists' default to signifiers of the other-worldly and spiritual, actually reveals the magical transformation of capital Marx had spoken so presciently about when he critiqued the "mystical character of the commodity"⁶⁸ and "all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production."⁶⁹ Capital, in its virtualised guise, now rules supreme. Its machinations are simultaneously complex and mystifyingly invisible. The transformation of value today is the most alchemical and inexplicable of all transmutations. And the transformation, as if by magic, of nothing into something, representing the basic spirit of capitalism, is nowhere more mysterious than in the art world. Here questions of value are perhaps more relative and ambiguous than anywhere else. Yet, the magical escalation of the value of certain types of contemporary art is at the same time devoid of mystery or hope of transcendence. That is unless we concede the impossible, though everywhere encouraged, hope for limitless accumulation. The results of an adherence to such a principle is basically the denuding of resources and massive attendant ecological destruction. This is also potentially 'magical' as well as the world slowly but surely, evaporates.

The institutionalised wasting of resources also affects the realm of contemporary art institutions that scramble evermore competitively for their dues. But does this mean these institutions need be forced into a situation of infantilism where they see themselves as merely beckoning incredulous viewers ready to believe anything, no matter how unconvincing? It is true that 'institutional freedom' might be tautological from a certain vantage point. After all, even those institutions that imagine themselves free may only be so, inasmuch as they are forced to be free within the confining dictates of a pervasive corporatism. Still, like contemporary artists, they should realise, as Breton and the Surrealists should have at some point, that there is no escape from the (often harsh) realities of socio-political life. Art can never transcend the conditions of its own production—it can only imagine that it can. Pretending is disingenuously acceding to power the status quo; we present what we want to believe in bad faith, knowing what we exhibit is merely an easily consumed fantasy more palatable than the prevailing situation from which it emerged. That is not to say artists need to give up experimentation, the invention of personas, referencing of rituals or the development of obliquely irrational narrative strains. However, these tendencies have histories and mean little if they are considered primarily as affect, a means of supplying exotic content to museums seeking material support disguised as spiritual resurrection. Contemporary art can penetrate further, and more problematically perhaps for institutions, to the heart of the matter, to the actually existing material circumstances of art's production and display. Ignoring these for the recycled embrace of the superficially magical and mystic, offensive in any case to cultures and communities critically maintaining otherwise marginalised cultural rituals, does nothing but foster ignorance. So too does the related, equally mystical promotion of creativity as a supposedly universally unassailable post-critical value. Both tendencies promote more broadly, and more alarmingly in times of "post-truth"⁷⁰ politics, "the glossolalic writing on the wall that ushers in yet another dark age, a new obscurantism."⁷¹ Facing and eluding such a fate via recourse to skepticism, wit and an objectless faith, may in fact be art's greatest contemporary strength.

Art is *Not Magic*

Notes:

¹ Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 1997, p. 79

² Myths of the artist's 'primitive' sexual appetite, 'piercing gaze' and ruthless, interpersonal savagery followed him through much of his career

³ Isn't much of Picasso's oeuvre the performance of a supposed magical spontaneity with the artist acting as conjuror? One only need consider the artist's 'light drawings' photographed by Gjon Mili in 1949 in a series of famous long exposures. Here Picasso traced sacred pagan imagery in the air with a small electric light in his suitably cave-like studio in the south of France

⁴ Picasso's innumerable versions of Diego Velázquez's epochal *Las Meninas* (1656), and the work of other related luminaries, attests to his primitivising 'correction' of the European high art canon

⁵ Artaud "proposed a theatre that was in effect a return to magic and ritual and he sought to create a new theatrical language of totem and gesture—a language of space devoid of dialogue that would appeal to all the senses." See Gary Botting, *The Theatre of Protest in America*, Edmonton: Harden House, 1972, p. 6

⁶ Artaud wrote vividly of this experience and his peyote-induced visions in his book, published in English as *The Peyote Dance*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976

⁷ Acéphale, literally meaning "headless", was also the name of the literary review created and edited by Bataille. There were five issues between 1936 and 1939. The journal bore the subtitle *La Vonjuration Sacrée (Sacred Conjunction)*

⁸ These included refusing to shake hands with anti-Semites and celebrating the anniversary of the decapitation of France's King Louis XVI

⁹ In end these were never put into action. See Allan Stoekl, 'Introduction', *Georges Bataille, Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985, pp. 20-21

¹⁰ Georges Bataille quoted in Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, an Intellectual Biography*, London/New York: Verso, 2002, p. 253

¹¹ Ibid. p. 248

¹² Bataille, an avowed anti-idealist, detested what he viewed as Breton and Surrealism's Romantic idealism that valorised love and monogamous eroticism. See Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille, an Intellectual Biography*, London/New York: Verso, 2002

¹³ Both these terms were central to the Surrealist outlook. "*L'amour fou*" (crazy love) celebrated irrational romantic impulse. Similarly, "convulsive beauty" was theorised as a form of beauty merging compulsive attraction with vestiges of repulsive aversion. Both these concepts could be regarded as contemporary reinvestments of the Romantic sublime

¹⁴ This is perhaps more rationally understandable if considered as part of a much wider and urgent contemporary anti-fascist surge

¹⁵ The Nazi-aligned puppet government of France, led by Marshall Petain

¹⁶ Besides, Stalin's Communism was in full swing and anathema to anyone aware of its catastrophic travesties, inconsistencies and political compromises, was no choice at all

¹⁷ Michael R. Taylor, *Marcel Duchamp, Étant Donnée*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009, p. 69

¹⁸ Anna Balakian, introduction to André Breton's *Arcanum 17*, Copenhagen/Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004, p. 8

¹⁹ Interestingly Breton, a poet/writer, as opposed to many of Surrealism's visual artists, remained according to most contemporary accounts, always relatively poor. See Mark Polizzotti, *Revolution of the Mind: The Life of André Breton*, London/New York: Bloomsbury, 1995

²⁰ Thierry de Duve, 'Joseph Beuys, or the Last of the Proletarians', *Joseph Beuys, The Reader*, London/New York, I.B.Tauris, 2007, p. 141

²¹ Ibid. p.144

²² The militant title of the Surrealist journal first published in 1924 and produced for twelve issues, attests to its broader socio-political ambitions

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²³ It is interesting to consider how Surrealism would have fared in North America if its proponents had remained connected to Communism. As it was, the USA vogue for psychoanalysis, especially of the individualistically focused therapeutic kind, meant that whatever political message psychoanalysis may once have held, by the 1950s it had turned well and truly into a message of unabashed self-interest

²⁴ See Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993

²⁵ See Roslyn Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985

²⁶ The term “postmodern” refers largely to the Anglo-centric reading of certain strains of Continental postwar philosophy. While it was taken up globally, it holds comparatively little traction in Europe where most of its theoretical tenets originated. See Sylvère Lotringer, *French Theory in America*, New York: Routledge, 2001

²⁷ The questionable nature of Picasso’s magic powers, the supposedly unassailable singularity of his ‘genius’, has not stalled the Picasso industry even today. There are arguably more new publications on Picasso’s oeuvre and person than any other modern artist except perhaps Andy Warhol

²⁸ In particular, see Benjamin Buchloch’s withering ‘Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol’ (1980), and Rosalind Krauss’ ‘No to . . . Joseph Beuys’ (1997) both included in *Joseph Beuys, The Reader*, op cit.

²⁹ Joseph Beuys quoted in John F. Moffitt, *Occultism in Avant-Garde Art: The Case of Joseph Beuys*, Michigan: UMI Research Press Ann Arbor, 1988, pp. 108-109

³⁰ See Benjamin Buchloch, ‘Beuys: The Twilight of the Idol’, op cit., pp. 122-123

³¹ The letter was disguised as the “recently discovered” critical response of nineteenth century German-French composer Jacques Offenbach to Richard Wagner. See Benjamin Buchloch, *ibid.*, p. 123

³² Marcel Broodthaers, *ibid.*

³³ This is despite the fact that materially Beuys’ work speaks so forcefully and specifically of German war and immediate post-war experience. Beuys’ fat chair, his desiccated chocolate bars painted a pathetic brown, his zinc bathtub, piles of swept rubbish and mouldering sausages all suggest a particular historical time and place

³⁴ Communism that is, as an anti-nationalist ideal, that was not necessarily reflected in reality

³⁵ “*Jeder mensch ein künstler*” (1975) was one of Beuys’ most oft-repeated mantras and central to his greater artistic philosophy

³⁶ Regardless indeed, of his sometimes savage treatment by American critics, as we have seen

³⁷ Buchloch mentions Beuys’ attempt to address this paradox himself via a naive reimagining of money as the vaguely denominated “production capital”. See Thierry De Duve, ‘Joseph Beuys, or the Last of the Proletarians’ (1988), *Joseph Beuys, The Reader*, op cit., p. 142

³⁸ Referring to the teachings of Austrian Romantic, mystic and pedagogue, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925)

³⁹ “Cremaster, a cycle that would establish him as an international star beyond the art system, towards a cult of the person that exploded around him, contaminating far more than the enthusiasts of the genre.” Curator Olga Gambari in, *Matthew Barney, Mitologie Contemporanee*, Turin: Fondazione Merz, 2008, p. 153

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Like Warhol, Barney is obsessed with indicators of American-ness—line dancing, cowboys, rodeos, the Empire State Building, Cadillacs, show girls, musicals, celebrity culture, the American flag, etc. Unlike Warhol, Barney’s referencing of modern American culture places these popular images within distinctly abnormal and ritualistic contexts. This effectively renders such commonplaces of American iconography magically strange as well as psychologically inflected

⁴² Olga Gambari, op cit.

⁴³ Such imagery frequently focuses on orality, anality and genital fixation, suggesting classical psychoanalytic evidence of castration anxiety. However, with Barney such imagery suggests perhaps more powerfully a kind of ritualistic instinctiveness. On this note it is interesting to consider the difference between Barney’s art and that of an older contemporary like Robert Gober, whose interest in psychoanalytic symbolism appears both more poetic and critical

⁴⁴ This is particularly evident in Barney's cinematic palette, which is highly seductive in its foregrounding of material that signifies wealth and opulence. Polished chrome and metal, mirrored car duco, marble, folds of shot silk, lace, leather, gold, and precious stones further magnify a sense of their own magical properties, their undeniable rarity and specialness as well as their ritualistic potential

⁴⁵ Also sometimes referred to meaninglessly as "the contemporary"

⁴⁶ See Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991

⁴⁷ Dieter Roelstraete, 'Great Transformations: On the Spiritual in Art, Again', *The Return of Religion and Other Myths*, Utrecht: BAK, 2009, p. 159

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.160

⁴⁹ Irony was a core dimension of much postmodern art, a means of wryly distancing art and the artist from overused heroic narratives. Alternatively, much contemporary art has borrowed earnestly from ironic precedents seemingly without being aware of their ironic register

⁵⁰ Roelstraete, op cit., p.161

⁵¹ Peter Eeley quoted in Christopher Braddock, *Performing Contagious Bodies: Ritual Participation in Contemporary Art*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. xix

⁵² Anne Pasternak quoted, ibid.

⁵³ The title of this exhibition is undoubtedly referencing *Magiciens de la Terre (Magicians of the Earth)*, Paris, 1989

⁵⁴ From the press release for *Traces du sacré* at: <http://traces-du-sacre.centrepompidou.fr/exposition/>

⁵⁵ Lisa Slade; <http://adelaidebiennial.com.au/exhibition/about/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Curators Karen Verschooren (STUK, Leuven, Belgium) and Ils Huygens (Z33, Hasselt, Belgium) from a press release; <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/73270/artefact-expo-festival-2017the-act-of-magic/>

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Graham M. Jones, Professor of Anthropology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), ibid.

⁶² Again, the return of primitivising gestures in museum art contexts, whether they are intentionally ironic or not, is especially curious in an era like our own believed to be quintessentially postcolonial. Contemporary postcolonialism could be equally read as neo-colonialist, as inhabitants of developing nations are simply now paid for their continuing subjugation

⁶³ Jerry Saltz, 'The Dazzler', artnet online; <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/sigmar-polke6-16-10.asp>

⁶⁴ Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson, Collected Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. p. 312

⁶⁵ Roelstraete, op cit., p. 165

⁶⁶ Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, London/New York: Verso, 2015, p. 115

⁶⁷ That is, the generation who have grown up 'liking' texts, posts and images on social media

⁶⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (1867), London: Penguin Classics, 1976 and 1990, p. 164

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 169

⁷⁰ "Post-truth" being a type of representational politics devoid of any ethical commitment, and political by name only

⁷¹ Roelstraete, op cit., p. 170